



# FINCHINGFIELD PARISH COUNCIL

14 The Hopgrounds Finchingfield Essex CM7 4LU

## SOCIAL MEDIA POLICY

Reviewed at the Parish Council Meeting of 31<sup>st</sup> October 2023

### STATEMENT OF INTENT

To ensure Social Media is used by Councillors and the Clerk in the appropriate manner therefore safeguarding the Parish Council.

Finchingfield Parish Council has a Facebook page where it is the Clerks responsibility to regularly update with information, ensuring strict controls are in place, in particular the ability to review comments before being released in the public domain.

Parish Councillors to inform the Parish Clerk which methods of Social Media are being used by them.

**1. Social Media** encompasses a range of new digital technologies that allow people to share information, build relationships and share opinions. Finchingfield Parish Council has chosen to use social media to provide an additional means to communicate with residents, clubs, societies and businesses and to impart information to anyone with an interest in the villages.

1.1 ensure the safeguards are put in place to prevent the misuse of Social Media

1.2 all conduct on Social Media channels must accord with our existing policies: Code of Conduct for Councillors, Grievance & Disciplinary Procedures, Combined Safeguarding Policy for Children, Young People & Vulnerable Adults

**2. Social Media** refers to all types of electrical media where people can discuss and talk freely to each other over an open network, common examples are Facebook, Twitter & Whatsapp.

**3.** This Social Media Policy covers Councillors and employees.

**4. Social media** best practice Social media channels, i.e. Twitter, Facebook and Instagram are great, cost-free tools to communicate about parish council work, events and community involvement, providing they are used properly.

### **5. Use of social media by parish council employees**

The parish council encourages employees to make reasonable and appropriate use of social media websites as part of their work. It is an important part of how the council engages with the community. Employees may contribute to the parish council's social media activities, for example by writing a blogs or by managing a Facebook account. Employees, or contractors, must be aware at all times that, while contributing to the parish council's social media activities, they are representing the parish council. Employees should use the same safeguards as they would with any other form of communication about the parish council in the public sphere.

These safeguards include: making sure that the communication has a purpose and a benefit for the council obtaining permission from the clerk, or the appropriate committee, before embarking on a public campaign using social media ensuring a colleague checks the content before it is published. Any communications that employees make in a professional or personal capacity through social media must not bring the council into disrepute, for example by:

- criticising or arguing with colleagues, councillors or the public
- making defamatory comments about individuals or other organisations or groups posting images that are inappropriate or links to inappropriate content.



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- breach confidentiality, for example by:
  - giving away confidential information about an individual (such as a colleague, councillor or a member of the public) which could be a breach of the Data Protection Act 1998
  - discussing items, reports or plans that have not been communicated to the public.
- breach copyright, for example by:
  - using someone else's images or written content without permission
  - failing to give acknowledgement where permission has been given to reproduce something.
- do anything that could be considered discriminatory against, or bullying or harassment of, any individual, for example by:
  - making offensive or derogatory comments relating to sex, gender reassignment, race (including nationality), disability, sexual orientation, religion or belief or age
  - using social media to bully another individual (such as fellow employee)
  - posting images that are discriminatory or offensive or links to such content.

## 6. Social media guidelines for councillors

It is important to distinguish between member information published by the parish council, such as the member pages on the council's website and personal blogs, or posts, which are the sole responsibility of the individual councillor. Councillors should be aware that what they put on social media is their responsibility. The reason why this distinction matters is that material published by the parish council is restricted in terms of content. It must not contain party political material, nor promote a particular view or councillor. It should not personalise issues. Councillors may use social media to improve engagement with the community and provide a leadership role. This can be a very positive activity as social media can reach a huge audience very quickly and may engage with parts of the community that does not engage often with local government. If councillors do discuss their work on social media (for example, giving opinions on their specialism or the sector in which the council operates), they must include on their profile a statement along the following lines:

"The views I express here are mine alone and do not necessarily reflect the views of the parish council." Provided councillors remain objective and professional in their use of social media there will not be any problems.

## 7. Legal code of conduct

What is unacceptable offline is unacceptable online. Members of the public, fellow councillors, or parish council staff may make a complaint about a councillor if they breach the code of conduct.

Key requirements in the code of conduct are:

- Treat others with respect.
- Comply with equality and anti-discrimination laws.
- Do not publish anything received in confidence.
- Do not bring the parish council, or your role as councillor, into disrepute.

## 8. Libel

If a councillor publishes an untrue statement about a person which causes 'serious harm' to their reputation they may sue the councillor for defamation. This also applies if a councillor allows someone to publish something libellous on their website if they know about it and don't take prompt action to remove it. A councillor can be sued for defamation on the basis of what they have put on Twitter and by re-tweeting libellous content. Simply passing on a comment saying you agree with a libellous comment is enough. A successful claim may result in an award of damages.

## 9. Copyright

Using images or text from a copyrighted source (for example, extracts from publications or photos) without permission is likely to breach copyright. Avoid publishing if there is any doubt or seek permission in advance. Breach of copyright may result in an award of damages. Data protection



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Do not publish the personal data of individuals unless you have their express written permission. Bias and predetermination If a councillor is involved in determining planning applications, it is best to avoid publishing anything which suggests they have already made up their mind on the matter. This could be challenged as predetermination and bias and runs the risk of the decision being challenged and invalidated. If in doubt advice should be sought.

## 10. Obscene material

Avoid publishing anything that people would consider obscene. Publication of obscene material is a criminal offence.

## 11. Surveys on social media

A 'survey' is defined as asking a single question, or more online relating to parish council business and/or inviting comments to a statement online relating to business. No parish councillor may carry out independent surveys about subjects that are related to parish council business without the express permission of the clerk. The Parish Clerk must agree the content and must also decide whether or not the survey will in any way compromise the parish council's position and/or influence the decision making process of a full council vote. No parish councillor may carry out a survey in their own name and then raise the survey at a parish councillor at full council or any committee meeting which could influence the decision-making process. The parish council should be registered for data protection and by registering councillors are covered whilst they are working for the council. If a councillor acts outside of the law, they will not be protected by the council's data protection and are liable for their own actions.

## 12. Dealing with negative remarks on social media

- Social media channels are a great tool for engagement and spreading the word, but inevitably they are misused and can attract criticism and complaints. Negative comments should be brought to the attention of the clerk and dealt with as quickly as possible.
- Keep any replies factual and to the point.
- Always try to be positive and thank/acknowledge the feedback.
- Never reply to trolls or spam, block them immediately. Standard responses to negative posts:

Thank you for contacting us, we are addressing the issue. Thank you for bringing this to our attention. Please contact [clerk@finchingfield-pc.gov.uk](mailto:clerk@finchingfield-pc.gov.uk) to discuss the issue. Thank you for your feedback, we have forwarded it to the appropriate contact.

## 13. Media – Newspapers/Journals/Magazines/Radio/TV

- The Clerk is the first port of call for all officer-related media enquiries. Where appropriate the Clerk to respond to all calls and may arrange interviews with the Chairman/Councillors. Councillors **must not** issue any statements to the Media without prior approval by the Clerk.
- The Clerk, & Councillors will:
  - Promote the reputation of the organisation
  - Respond quickly and effectively to media enquiries
  - Respect the confidential nature of information which is retained by the Parish Council on individual cases or other matters which are officially specified as confidential